

# Coming up short

## Sullivan County HealthCare funds low; \$4M borrowed

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Staff Writer

The number of residents at Sullivan County HealthCare has seen a steady decline over the summer leaving the county with a cash flow shortage requiring the borrowing of \$4 million.

“Every year we have a **Newport** summer slump,” county manager Ed Gil de Rubio said. “But this summer was more than normal.”

During a special commissioners’ meeting on Wednesday, a credit line was approved giving county treasurer Cynthia Sweeney the ability to pay county bills through the end of the year. The loan is in anticipation of \$10.4 million in tax revenues due from county towns on Dec. 17.

The county delegation and executive finance committee are expected to meet this morning to discuss whether to approve the loan.

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According to Gil de Rubio, the county has already borrowed \$4.5 million in anticipation of the December taxes. If the new loan is approved, the total amount borrowed would be \$9.5 million, leaving less than a million dollars for expenses for the six months of the remaining fiscal year after the loans are paid off with the December tax revenue. The fiscal years ends June 30.

Gil de Rubio said the remaining tax money would be combined with income from the nursing home and other revenue sources to keep the county afloat, but added that the budget would be tight.

“We’re hurting because our census is low,” Gil de Rubio said. “We need to enhance revenues and cut expenses. My goal is to keep the nursing home off the (county) tax rate.”

The nursing home is licensed for 156 beds and as recently as the middle of June 146 beds were occupied. The average daily census for July declined to 135 and by Wednesday the census was at 126. For each bed left unoccupied the nursing home has the potential to lose \$400 a day, Gil de Rubio said.

Sweeney said the commissioners need to decide if the nursing home should be funded through taxes.

“We have to decide whether the nursing home is a revenue source or a service of the county,” Sweeney said. “That’s the basic question that needs to be answered.”

In addition to the decreasing census, Gil de Rubio said that the use of agency nursing for staff nurses who “call out” is costing the county hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“We’re having a very, very serious problem with call-outs,” Gil de Rubio said. “It’s continuing and we’re still having problems with that.”

Call outs are when a nurse call to say she will not be coming to work that day and an agency is called to send a fill in for the day.

During the last fiscal year, the county spent \$700,000 on agency nursing, according to Gil de Rubio. So far this year the county has spent \$179,000.

“That’s definitely the big ticket,” Gil de Rubio said. “And it will come to an end.”

Nursing home administrator David Laplante said he has a plan to reduce the number of call-outs.

“On Tuesday we will finalize a program with the nursing staff to decrease call-outs,” Laplante said. “We need to strike a balance to provide proper care for residents and reduce expenses.”

Laplante said that by eliminating agency nursing he will not only decrease expenses, but the residents of the nursing home will see an improvement in their care.

“Healthy residents are residents that have a relationship with the staff,” Laplante said. “Getting rid of agency nursing and having staff on hand will bring an inherent commitment to residents and the nursing home.”

Attempts to reach the head of the nursing union, Dorothy Couitt, were unsuccessful.

Laplante is also speaking with area hospitals and doctors to improve relationships with them.

“We are very comfortable we will see the needed increases in the census,” Laplante said. “But it does take time.”

The delegation meeting is scheduled to begin this morning at 9 a.m. at the Ahern Building located at the county complex in Unity.

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